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THE BOOK OF SELECTIONS: ITS VALUE IN TEACHING HIGH-SCHOOL LITERATURE¹

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I do not especially care for such a subject as this, a subject concerning which "much may be said on both sides"; but since it seems desirable to consider the question on this occasion, I will, as a certain great man has said, "I will assay it."

Collections of verse and prose are in such common employment in teaching literature in the high school and the practice is so firmly established that it seems a work of supererogation to discuss the matter at all. But when we reflect that acceptance does not always imply acceptableness and when we remember how many traditional beliefs and customs in education have been put upon trial these last few years and how woefully weak their defense has often been, then perhaps we will concede that the subject is at least worth looking into, if only to satisfy ourselves as to the grounds upon which our approval is based.

Of course, collections of literature are not new. English anthologies date as far back as "The Paradyse of Daynty Devises," "A Gorgeous Gallery of Gallant Inventions," and other alliteratively alluring anthologies. There has always been a laudable instinct to gather together short fugitive selections, to preserve within the secure folds of a volume wandering poems and stories which might otherwise be lost. And the use in school of collections of bits of English literature is about as old, I conjecture, as the teaching of English literature. Really, the elementary-school readers have never been anything but collections; that is the way in which children have, from time immemorial, "learned their grammarie." I do not know when the first gathering together of English classics for high-school use took place, but I know that the volume of col-

¹ Read before the National Council of Teachers of English in Pittsburgh, July, 1918.

lections most popular when I managed to secure my introduction to English literature was quite a different book from the collections now in use. The earlier volume contained a few pages, not more than seventy-five, of specimens—that is what they were termed, “specimens”—inserted, as by afterthought, in an appendix. The selections might be studied or not, as the instructor deemed wise: the history was the thing of importance. The modern volume is more likely to consist of some hundreds of pages of selections, with biographical and historical material reduced to the impotence of eight-point footnotes.

Obviously, collections of literary masterpieces have filled a need, even if that need has been but vaguely expressed. We have felt that whether we wished, as in earlier days, to illustrate literary history or, as nowadays, to usher students into the broad fields of literature, we must have a volume of selections as a text. It is the most convenient and the most inexpensive way by which we can bring children into contact with the literature we think most worth their while. The practice has come under fire, not because the principle of using collections is weak, in and of itself, but either because the material in the collections has been poorly chosen or because it has been ineffectively organized—or both.

The material may be poorly chosen because it is of a kind not suitable to children. We have all made blunders of this sort; we have placed before children poems and novels and essays that appeal only to the mature mind, often only to the specifically literary type of mature mind; the classics on the required lists for reading and study for entrance to college give ample proof of this. Makers of collections for school use have been no worse sinners than the rest of us in this respect, except that their authority has raised them to a “bad eminence.” A collection of literature for high-school students should assuredly be made with the children themselves in mind—their interests, their tastes, their personalities.

Moreover, some of the material in most collections errs in that it fails to represent the authors at their best, their best, at least, so far as their charm and interest for children is concerned. To give Chaucer’s *Prologue* as a representative specimen of Chaucer

instead of the *Knight's Tale* or the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, to select *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* as attractive specimens of Milton instead of a few sonnets and a book or two of *Paradise Lost* (if indeed we must have Milton at all), is almost as senseless as to expect to introduce children to Dickens through *The Tale of Two Cities*. Surely this is not the way to advertise our authors, to show them to the children in their best light.

From the standpoint of organization of material, perhaps the gravest faults are to be found in the collections made by stringing selections together on a chronological thread. If the book begins with Alfred and Bede and ends with Masfield and H. G. Wells, and if we attempt to give a specimen from each minor author, we have a compilation utterly useless and utterly ludicrous for use in the high school. Aside from the suspicion, strong and continually growing stronger, that the chronological order is not the psychological order for young people, aside from this, it makes the collection a piebald miscellany, a hodgepodge, a thing of odds and ends. Instead of a few heroic figures aloft on pedestals with their poems draped majestically about them, we see a file of figures like the phantom kings that Macbeth saw, stretching out "to the crack of doom." Using such a collection our students can hope for no more than a smattering of everything, a taste out of each dish, a bowing acquaintance with every scribbling Tom, Dick, and Harry in literary history. True, we may omit some of the material if we wish; but why should not the collectors and editors exercise the same privilege?

More satisfactory than the chronologically arranged collections are the collections arranged on the principle of types: types of essays, of letters, of narrative poems, of short stories; every English teacher has edited at least one collection of short stories. In this kind of compilation the collector is freer to choose his specimens. And moreover there is a closer logical connection between two units of a type than between two units, one perhaps in lyric verse, another of narrative prose, belonging to two periods. The type plan is logical enough. But let me point out, if the chronological sequence is not necessarily psychological, neither is the logical necessarily psychological. Not many children are interested

in types, and the juxtaposition of, say, a Hawthorne short story and a Poe short story is from many aspects artificial and superficial, more especially since the collector often thinks it necessary to follow the chronological or some other predetermined order.

The best principle of grouping in a collection of pieces—ominous word, “pieces”—is by theme and mood. The chief objection to any collection is likely to be its inconsecutiveness, its “scrappiness”; this objection can be obviated largely if the selections are grouped according to intrinsic and inherent subject and emotional tone. A child should find his poems of patriotism near one another, his stories and verses of imagination and mystery in one magic circle, his humorists thrusting elbows into each others’ sides, so that the selections echo and emphasize one another and the entire group arouses one predominant emotion. Palgrave has done this wonderfully well, considering the limitations he fixed for himself. Andrew Lang did it well in his *Blue Poetry Book*. But no one, I think, has made the ideal collection of both verse and prose for high-school children. We are edging toward it, though; one recent collection cuts intrepidly loose from restraints of time- and form-arrangement, and presents prose and verse, English and American selections, grave and gay, all pretty well within the circle of children’s interests. It is a charming collection, but chaotic, hit-or-miss, catch-as-catch-can, with no principle of selection or arrangement apparent to the reader. This is not the best collection, but it has a sound principle at its base, and better collections will surely follow.

As I see it, then, the weaknesses of the collection as a means of introducing children to literature are not in the principle of the collection but in the kinds of collections we have had to use. We have not yet achieved perfection in the machine, but that does not justify our throwing the machine on the scrap-heap. At its best a collection will always be more or less incoherent, but so is a magazine—and most of us expect children to read magazines. And as to the mistakes in choosing and in organizing the material which goes into the collection, they are due to fundamental errors into which we have all fallen, of mistaking the purpose of teaching literature. When we discern clearly that the function of literature

in the high school is not to acquaint children with authors and periods, not to make them logicians and critics of style and types, but to bring them into frequent and familiar contact with a great deal of sound, satisfying reading-matter lying within the range of their experiences, feelings, and interests, ministering to their wishes and needs, and so arranged that one selection lures on to another—then we may hope to have collections which will be true open sesames to the treasures in books.

Perhaps we can most clearly perceive the advantages of the collection as an implement for teaching literature in high school by considering what we could substitute for it. I can think of only two substitutes for the collection: reading of a few authors one after the other, and the individual method. Let us see where they would lead us.

We could construct a very pretty course of study in high-school literature by taking up, say, Longfellow and Scott in the first year, Tennyson and Stevenson in the second year, and so on. I presume we could hardly hope to become acquainted with more than two a year, eight in all, though we could get pretty familiar with those eight. But what of the scores of splendid, inspiring poems and stories and novels we could never bring within the child's ken, and of the dozens of agreeable personalities he would never meet? And what if some members of the class failed, as some would be sure to do, to like certain of our authors? If we were using a collection, that would not be such a serious matter; we would soon be moving on to "green fields and pastures new." No, I believe I should not wish to trust wholly to the intensive reading of a few authors in a high-school course, no matter who those authors were.

The individual method, the allowing each child to range where his taste and fancy lead him, within the circle bounded by the teacher's discretion, would be the ideal way if only we had ideal conditions. If each of us teachers had but one child or a half-dozen children to guide, and if we and the children had all the time we needed and all the books we needed, and if we could trust our own judgment, and if the powers-that-be would give us a free rein—what a prospect opens up before us! I expect to try the method out this next year on a selected class of ten students, and

I at least anticipate a good time. But this, after all, is but Charles Lamb's "browsing" idea dressed up in pedagogical terms, and I doubt if browsing, even if well guided, if guided browsing is thinkable, can function properly—I believe "function" is the word—in the rush and scurry of high-school life. I doubt if one can browse properly outside the privacy of his own preserves. I should not want to depend largely upon personally conducted browsing tours. For that matter it may be tried on a small scale with a collection, allowing each student to follow up his leads and make his own discoveries.

I cannot but think that the right kind of collection—specimens complete within themselves, fitting into the children's tastes and needs, grouped by the simple guiding principle of permitting birds of a feather to flock together—is better than either of the proposed substitutes. But of course no one method will serve. We must use all the means within our power: collections, reading of longer classics, class magazine-reading, intensive reading of some one or two great authors of interest to high-school students, and "outside" reading influenced and guided from the inside. One method will serve for one student, another for another; and as we have all sorts and conditions of children whom we would fain usher into the delectable land of books, we must employ all legitimate means. Among these the collection holds an important place.